Nordic-Chinese Intersections within Education

Palgrave Macmillan
2019-12

Liu , H , Dervin , F & Du , X (eds) 2019 , Nordic-Chinese Intersections within Education .
Palgrave Studies on Chinese Education in a Global Perspective , Palgrave Macmillan . https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/310087
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28588-3

unspecified
acceptedVersion

Haiqin Liu • Fred Dervin • Xiangyun Du
Editors

Nordic-Chinese Intersections within Education

palgrave
macmillan

Editors
Haiqin Liu
Department of Teacher Education
University of Helsinki
Helsinki, Finland

Fred Dervin
Department of Teacher Education
University of Helsinki
Helsinki, Finland

Xiangyun Du
Department of Learning and Philosophy
Aalborg University
Aalborg, Denmark

Palgrave Studies on Chinese Education in a Global Perspective
ISBN 978-3-030-28587-6 ISBN 978-3-030-28588-3 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28588-3

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Contents

13

Conclusion: Comparing Chinese and Nordic Education Systems—Some Advice

Ning Chen and Fred Dervin

横看成岭侧成峰, 远近高低各不同。
不识庐山真面目, 只缘身在此山中。

From the side, a mountain range; from the end, a single peak;
Far, near, high, low, no two parts alike.
Why can't I tell the true shape of Mount Lu?
Because I myself am in the mountain.

This famous poem by Su Dongpo 苏轼 (1084/1994, p. 108) summarizes well the final message of this book: Things can look very different seen from different perspectives.

This book represents an attempt to help our readers see and understand Nordic and Chinese education beyond myths, and to consider some counter-narratives and different realities. In so doing, our authors

N. Chen (✉)
Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, Tianjin, China

F. Dervin
Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: fred.dervin@helsinki.fi

H. Liu et al. (eds.), *Nordic-Chinese Intersections within Education*, Palgrave Studies on Chinese Education in a Global Perspective,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28588-3_13

were following Michel Foucault's advice: "A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest" (1988, p. 154). The philosopher continues [a critique is also] "to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such" (ibid., p. 155). We hope that the book has convinced our readers to not take what they hear about Nordic or Chinese education as 'self-evident' and to consider, not their 'true shape', but their different shapes (like Mount Lu in Su Dongpo's poem).

According to Ni (2013, p. 15) Chinese civilization has always been very curious about, and open to, foreign ideas and material goods. He claims that "the greatness of Chinese civilization lies partly in its openness to the outside world" (ibid.). China is very open indeed, especially in terms of improvement in education; however, China should refrain from merely getting input from the outside but negotiating *win-win* relations: China is strong enough to receive and *to give*. In our own research on Finnish-Chinese edubusiness, we clearly noted an imbalance between Chinese and Finnish partners in co-developing professional development programmes, whereby Finnish partners were unwilling somehow to discuss learning about and from Chinese education (Xing, Dervin, & Fan, 2017).

In what follows, we propose four pieces of advice for when we compare Chinese and Nordic education. We also consider the advice applicable to other contexts of international comparative education. A few words about comparison before the advice: it is essential to remember that comparison is never neutral as it always has a starting point which relies on given contexts, ideologies, imaginaries and even stereotypes about the things being compared. For Radhakrishnan (2013, p. 16) comparisons "are inevitably tendentious, didactic, competitive, and prescriptive. Behind the seeming generosity of comparison, there always lurks the aggression of a thesis".

Education is too complex a context to make simple comparisons such as *Danish*, *Finnish children are happier than Chinese children*—something we often hear from people who have never visited Denmark/Finland or

met a Danish/Finnish kid. As such not two schools are the same, even two classrooms in the same school. In the Nordics, a classroom somewhere cannot fully generalize what is happening in smaller and isolated places in other parts of the Nordics. The same applies to China: a school in Zhongguancun in Beijing can hardly compare to a school in an isolated part of the country. To compare, one needs to homogenize, and thus create an imagined majority with positive or negative characteristics that can too easily be used to idealize or denigrate someone or something. This also leads to an overemphasis on difference between contexts, which may be biased if similarities are not also considered. This can also too easily lead to stigmatization of difference ("Chinese education is too competitive and thus bad for the children"). Obviously, education systems are too complex to be considered homogeneous.

Our first advice relates to a very famous quote from the 'father' of international comparative education, Higginson (1979, p. 49): "We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden, and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then **expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant**" (our emphasis). So-called good practices elsewhere may not function in a different context, partly or fully. For instance, in Finland, parents receive a lot of financial support for their children's education (education is the responsibility of the state) and thus transferring some practices from the Finnish context to China might require making fundamental societal changes, which are neither possible nor compatible with current politics in China. Some practices that might appear appealing in Finland may not work in China because of parents' views and wishes for their children's education and future (e.g. little testing, short days at school, etc.).

The second advice is to bear in mind that whenever we hear "Nordic education is…" or "Chinese education is…", whatever follows is too general to apply to the generality of the complex educational contexts found in these two contexts. From our experiences of Chinese and Nordic education we think it is fair to say that China and the Nordics both have good and bad systems of education; they both have different schools with different socio-economic statuses (The Nordics: city centres

vs. some suburbs in cities; rural/urban divide; private vs. public schools). If we compare, we need to take into account all the different characteristics of the contexts we compare, and look into both differences and similarities.

The Nordics often bring to mind the 'miraculous' case of Finnish education. More recent critical pieces of news or books published about Finnish education actually show that Finnish education faces very similar issues as Chinese education. In her book in English titled *School's Fault*, Finnish teacher Maarit Korhonen (2018) shares scenes of her everyday experiences as a teacher in two different schools in Finland (an affluent school and a not so affluent one). In the following excerpts, we can see many problems similar to China:

- about discussing the children's future:
  (Teacher) But having a great future doesn't necessarily require money, does it? It could also mean happiness and achieving your dreams?
  (Student) Someone who works as a cleaner can't be happy. A cleaner hasn't made it if he's a cleaner, this ten-year-old claims.
- about success:
  (Student) My dad works at Nokia and he says that only those people who do well at school will be successful elsewhere, too. And then they'll be rich.
  (a student after having received a fairly good grade on a test): "I didn't do well enough, sobbing more loudly"
- about misbehaviour in class:
  (…)
  a couple of them continue to be difficult the whole term. The conversation we have is always the same:
  (Teacher) — Would you take your book out, please?
  (Student) — Do I have to?
  (Teacher) — Yes, you do.
  (Student) — But I don't want to.

In autumn 2018, many pieces of news reflected the increasing problems faced by Finnish education. The following headlines give a clear hint of these issues:

(Yle News 8.10.2018) Integration of special needs pupils adds to teacher workload (teachers feel increasingly stressed and incapable of facing students' individual problems)

(Yle News 12.9.2019) Teachers' Union: Finnish schools need €1bn to return to Nordic standards to ensure well-being of pupils and teachers.

The third advice relates to the current global contextual factors that need to be borne in mind when comparing Chinese and Nordic education. These include: (1) global educational systems are governed and oriented by international rankings that have an influence on how we talk about 'good' and 'bad' education, and how we pick 'good' and 'bad' systems of education (e.g. PISA studies); (2) since the early 2010s the Nordics have experienced intensive nation/region branding (packaging the Nordics as a product) and the marketization of its education to the rest of the world (e.g. Finnish education export). Edubusiness is about selling educational services, materials and institutions outside national borders, which might entail using 'white lies' to sell Nordic education. As much as a company like Apple would not admit to their products having potential defects, selling Nordic education might mean camouflaging some of its less successful aspects (e.g. growing achievement gap between social groups, boys and girls).

Edubusiness from Finland, for instance, involves sale of made-to-order trainings, knowledge, services and consultancy to other countries (Cai & Kivistö, 2011). According to the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture (2010), "Higher education institutions will be encouraged to be active and assume a major role as education export operators". This means that scholars' activities and discourses on Finnish education might also be influenced by market-oriented agendas. The consequences might be the development and spread of ready-made discourses on Finland/Finnish education (with the idea that what is heard from "the horse's mouth" must be 'true'); a thirst for Finnish presence in foreign media, which can serve as advertising; (auto-)censorship with a potential loss of criticality, use of white lies and potential manipulation; an overemphasis on Finland as an exotic place; and the development of a specific pedagogical industry: Places and people are chosen for pedagogical tourists (international schools/'normal schools' attached to universities that train student teachers).

The next piece of advice will sound naïve, but having met hundreds of educators, scholars and even parents in China, we often feel that this is a problem: There is no 'paradise' on our planet! The word *Nordics* seems to bring up certain overly positive images that could easily be questioned. The *2018 World Happiness Report* published by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, which was reported globally by the media, placed Finland number 1—the happiest country in the world (the other Nordic countries followed). But what is the meaning of happiness here? A look at the criteria makes us wonder if the whole world understands this notion the same way. The criteria for determining happiness in the report include:

Social support corresponds to answers to the question: "If you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not?"
Freedom to make life choices: "Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?"
Generosity: "Have you donated money to a charity in the past month?"

Can one *really* compare answers to these questions across national, cultural and linguistic borders? For instance, the words used are necessarily polysemic: *relatives, friends, freedom* and so on and can lead to potential misinterpretations. In China, for example, family comprises more individuals than in the Nordics. Charity can mean more than donating money in some countries. So are we comparing apples and oranges here? Considering the high levels of depression, suicide and alcoholism (see e.g. the following study on Finnish adolescents: Torikka et al., 2017), Finnish researcher Martela (2018), specializing in both the psychology and philosophy of well-being and meaning in life at Aalto University, explains:

> What I'm trying to say is that, regarding happiness, it's complicated. Different people define happiness very differently. And the same person or country can be high on one dimension of happiness while being low on another dimension of happiness. Maybe there is no such thing as happiness as such. Instead we should look at these dimensions separately and examine how well various nations are able to support each of them.

Finnish education exporters and some Finnish researchers have used and abused the rhetoric of Finnish education being based on the ideology of Joy of Learning/Fun learning, which seems to confirm and go hand in hand with 'Finnish happiness'. However, this has misled people from outside Finland to believe in this potential white lie.

As a final point, in Li and Dervin (2018), one of us suggests considering any system of education by means of ideological continua (in terms of policy, pedagogy, educational actors, etc.), rather than single indicators. These are examples:

Fun/student-centered learning <…..> teacher-centered learning
Inequality <…..> social justice
Inclusion <…..> exclusion
Parents involved <…..> not involved
Motivated teachers <…..> Unmotivated parents
"Good" <…..> "bad" teachers
Hard-working students <…..> Not-so-hard-working
Good school buildings <…..> bad school buildings

This is important to avoid creating certain international hierarchies that are not always founded. For example, the idea that Nordic education is more student-centred than Chinese education is not always correct. Many teachers alternate between student- and teacher-centredness or use forms of student-centred approaches which are actually teacher-centred. In a similar vein, some parents in the Nordics are very much interested in their children's education and offer all the support that they can, while others will rely too much on teachers educating their children for them.

Beyond media, academic and supranational mantras about the 'good' and 'bad' educational performers of the world, there is a need to dig into wider ecosystems and to systematically dispel myths about the 'best' performers. Finally, we suggest that we work with each other to learn *with* each other about what we can each bring to the table. We can all contribute to good education by sharing, negotiating and constructing 'good' and multifaceted practices. It means for China to also be somewhat more confident about its (already) admirable achievements in education.

References

Cai, Y., & Kivistö, J. (2011). *Higher education reforms in Finland and China—Experiences and challenges in post-massification era*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

Foucault, M. (1988). *Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings of Michel Foucault, 1977–1984*. New York: Routledge.

Higginson, J. H. (1979). *Selections from Michael Sadler: Studies in world citizenship*. Liverpool, Merseyside: Dejall & Meyorre International Publishers.

Korhonen, M. (2018). *School's Fault?* Helsinki: Into.

Li, Y., & Dervin, F. (2018). *Continuing professional development of teachers in Finland*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Martela, F. (2018, May). Finland is the happiest country in the world, and Finns aren't happy about it. *Scientific American*. Retrieved from https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/finland-is-the-happiest-country-in-the-world-and-finns-arent-happy-about-it/

Ni, J. B. (2013). *Medical ethics in China: A transcultural interpretation*. London: Routledge.

Radhakrishnan, R. (2013). Why compare? In R. Felski & S. Friedman (Eds.), *Comparison: Theories, approaches, uses* (pp. 15–33). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Su Dongpo. (1084/1994). *Selected poems of Su Tung-p'o*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press.

Torikka, A., Kaltiala-Heino, R., Luukkaala, T., & Rimpelä, A. (2017). Trends in Alcohol use among adolescents from 2000 to 2011: The role of socioeconomic status and depression. *Alcohol and Alcoholism, 52*(1), 95–103.

Xing, X., Dervin, F., & Fan, P. (2017). Truths, omissions and illusions in the era of marketization. Chinese university leaders' perceptions of Finnish education. *Journal of the European Higher Education Area, 4*, 33–56.